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Quality and Inequality in Undergraduate Courses

A guide for national and
institutional policy makers

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Further information on the project can be found at the project website:
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Comments

If you would like to make any comments on this guide or discuss the implications of the project's findings in relation to the quality of undergraduate courses, then please contact:

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Summary of Main Findings

'The Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project' was a longitudinal investigation of sociology and related social science degree courses in four universities (see Appendix I for an outline). Its main objectives were to investigate what social science students value about their university education and differences in curriculum and teaching in different universities. The main findings are summarised below and relate to defining, improving and measuring the quality of undergraduate courses.

Defining good quality undergraduate courses

- High quality undergraduate courses are those in which students engage with academic knowledge in transformative ways. Courses in different disciplines are likely to be transformative in different ways.
- In sociology-related social sciences, academic engagement is transformative in three ways: students gain access to an understanding of academic knowledge that is interesting and relevant to their lives; it changes the way that they understand themselves and their place in the world; and they gain an enhanced understanding of society. Such outcomes emphasise the importance of maintaining sociology-related social science courses across the sector.
- Good teaching is vital if students are to engage with academic knowledge in transformative ways.

Improving the quality of undergraduate courses

- Improving teaching is central to improving the quality of undergraduate courses.
- Good teaching is multidimensional and improving it is time-consuming and challenging.
- A focus on quality enhancement that supports lecturers is in danger of being obscured by the emphasis in recent policy documents on improving quality through competition.

Measuring the quality of undergraduate courses

- Key measures of the quality of undergraduate courses are students' engagement with academic knowledge and good teaching.
- When quality is measured by engagement with academic knowledge, the ranking of the universities in the study is very different from that in national higher education league tables.
- Without engaging meaningfully in academic knowledge, students are unlikely to gain much benefit from studying an undergraduate degree. So in order to be valid measures of the quality of undergraduate courses, national higher education league tables, Key Information Sets and the National Student Survey need to take account of students' engagement with academic knowledge.

Who is this guide for?

This guide has been written to suggest some broad principles of practice to those who have responsibility for monitoring and improving the quality of undergraduate courses at programme, institutional, and national levels. It will be particularly relevant to those whose responsibilities include social science disciplines.

What is the purpose of this guide?

The guide sets out key findings from the Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees. The study investigated the quality of undergraduate sociology-related degrees by examining such courses in four universities, which were given the pseudonyms Prestige, Selective, Community, and Diversity Universities in order to reflect their different reputations and positions in league tables. We have found that students in all the universities evaluated good quality education in the same way; and, that institutional reputations do not reflect the quality of students' education.

The project involved the collection of wide ranging data sets (see Appendix I). The headline findings that we report here are based on biographical and educational interviews (with 98 students); additional interviews with 31 case-study students who were interviewed in each year of the study; a survey completed by over 750 students; and, an analysis of curriculum and national policy documents.

1. What are high quality undergraduate degree courses?

Our findings

Our findings indicate that high quality undergraduate courses are those which lead students to engage with academic knowledge in transformative ways. That is, courses are of a high quality when students study hard to understand the academic content of their courses. For students studying sociology-related social science courses, engagement with academic knowledge is transformative in three ways: students gain access to an understanding of academic knowledge that is interesting and relevant to their lives; it changes the way that they understand themselves and their place in the world; and, they come to a deeper understanding of the relationships between people and society's systems and structures.

Access to and understanding of academic knowledge that is interesting and relevant to students' lives

In high quality undergraduate social science courses, students engage with knowledge because they find it enjoyable, interesting and relevant to their current and future lives. We found that students' engagement with academic knowledge resulted in enhanced academic and employability skills. By way of a challenge to the idea that employability skills should be consciously 'bolted onto' academic courses, our study suggests that, for social science students, employability skills are acquired in tandem with the processes necessary to understand academic knowledge.

I really enjoy just having gained the skills that I have over the last year and half. Extracting information, analyzing it and being able to see beyond the surface material and being able to go beyond that and find real processes behind what is happening. And linking that into historical and social contexts and with cultural theories. That is what I really, really enjoy.

Ester, Selective, Year 2

Changes in the way that students understand themselves and their place in the world;

In high quality undergraduate social science courses, students change their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. One element of this educational gain is that students' sense of confidence about what they can be and do increases. We found students maturing in two specific ways: as people who empathise with, understand, are interested in and accept others; and, as people who question and challenge what goes on the world around them.

University has opened my eyes too much. I've been too exposed to reading about certain things that are happening around me, I can't just shut my eyes and go back to normality. I don't think I can do that now, I'd feel like I am betraying myself and what I think and what I believe in.

Martin, Community, Year 3

A deeper understanding of people and society

In high quality social science courses students come to an understanding of society which is more complex than they held previously. The process of understanding relates to a change in personal identity which includes an intention to change society for the better. Most students envisage working in public service in which they will use their knowledge, understanding and dispositions to contribute to society.

Because of what I've learned in terms of knowledge about the way society is, it's made me question everything more, and I like that because not everything has a definite answer, and I like seeing everything differently and seeing new things and it impacts on me as a person.

Leena, Diversity, Year 3

Supporting evidence from the literature

The importance of engagement with academic knowledge in transformational ways has been found in a diverse range of undergraduate disciplines. For example, the 'Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments Project' (see Entwistle 2009 for a summary) proposed the notion of 'ways of thinking and practising in the subject' to describe the richness of what students potentially gained through engagement with academic knowledge in Electronic Engineering, Biological Sciences, Economics, History and Media and Communication.

Similarly, Nespor's (1994) study shows the different forms of engagement with academic knowledge demanded of Physics students and Management students. These studies provide strong evidence of how students' engagement with academic knowledge allows them to make transformational gains from higher education. Gibbs (2010) argues that, whilst quality processes are enacted in different ways in different disciplines, the underpinning educational principles are similar. Based on our study and the supporting literature, it seems that, although the outcomes from undergraduate degrees in different disciplines are likely to vary, a key principle in pursuance of high quality university education is that students engage in knowledge in transformative ways.

Implications

There is a weight of evidence that suggests that engagement with academic knowledge should be central to the way policy-makers and practitioners think about the quality of undergraduate courses, although what students gain will vary between different disciplines. Our findings show that engagement in sociology-related social science knowledge has powerful and transformative outcomes for students that will benefit both themselves and society. This suggests the importance of maintaining such courses across the sector.

2. How to improve the quality of undergraduate courses

Our findings

High quality undergraduate courses, then, are characterised in terms of the extent to which students are engaged with academic knowledge in transformative ways. It follows that the quality of undergraduate courses will be improved by teaching that supports students to engage with academic knowledge. We found that good teaching is vital if students are to engage with academic knowledge. In relation to sociology-related social science, the students in the study evaluated teaching as good when:

- there are personal relationships with lecturers, who are accessible for questions and who encourage effort and challenge students to work hard;
- lecturers are interesting and enthusiastic; and give feedback which advises students how to improve;
- students are prepared for discussion in seminars and workshops, which should be highly participative, of a high quality, and academically-focused; and, when the relevance of the knowledge under discussion is made explicit, for example, by way of case studies and real-life examples;
- courses are well-designed and there are a varied teaching and assessment methods; and,
- students feel that they are supported on their courses and by the wider university to overcome obstacles to studying.

It can be seen that good teaching is multi-dimensional and complex: there are many aspects to attend to. Teaching was experienced as good in all the universities we studied, although the ranking of teaching across the institutions was different from that suggested by national higher education league tables. The most important elements of good teaching for the case-study students were: relationships with lecturers (some students thought that their lecturers were too distant and not interested in their progress); high quality discussion; and encouragement to do the hard work necessary to understand academic content (some students thought that lecturers were too lenient with students who didn't prepare for taught sessions, who didn't contribute to the discussions in these sessions, or who were disruptive, for example, by using their mobile phones during the sessions).

Supporting evidence from the literature

The aspects of good teaching identified in this project have been found in previous research across a range of disciplines (for example, see summaries in Ramsden 2004; Entwistle 2009; Gibbs 2010). Given the centrality of good teaching in supporting students' engagement with academic knowledge, improving university teaching in line with research evidence is the key to improving the quality of undergraduate degrees. Good teaching involves lecturers having the opportunity to think and talk with others about how to help students understand disciplinary knowledge through design of curricula, teaching and learning activities and assessment (Entwistle, 2009; Gibbs, 2010). This can be a time-consuming and challenging process for lecturers.

Implications

There is very strong evidence that good teaching is central to providing good quality undergraduate social science education. Improving teaching involves lecturers having time to think and talk about how to engage students in academic knowledge. This kind of teaching development is in danger of being obscured by a recent focus in policy documents on creating a competitive market for students-as-informed-consumers. The emphasis on assuring quality through competition for students is likely to encourage universities to focus on how their undergraduate courses and reputation are perceived externally rather than focusing on improving the quality of the teaching and learning experiences that they offer students.

3. How to measure the quality of undergraduate courses

Our findings

If high quality undergraduate courses are those which encourage students to engage with academic knowledge in transformative ways, then the extent of students' academic engagement should be central to the way that the quality of these courses is measured and communicated to the wider public. All of the social science departments we studied appear to offer a high quality experience for their students. The curricula engaged students with knowledge of comparable levels of sophistication and the assessment systems gave the same rewards for work of the same standard. Table 1 sets out the results of our survey in relation to the factors that we have identified as central to the quality of sociology-related undergraduate courses: students' engagement with academic knowledge, good teaching and the transformative outcomes they achieve. The table shows that different institutions did well on different measures of quality and that the rankings were not what would be expected based on the proxy measures of quality used in national higher education league tables.

Our analysis challenges the status of national higher education league tables as valid measures of the quality of undergraduate courses. This is because such tables misleadingly oversimplify the complexity of a high quality undergraduate education and because they offer no indication of students' engagement with academic knowledge.

By using measures that largely reflect historical reputation and financial advantage, national higher education league tables are likely to reinforce social inequality by suggesting incorrectly that students who have been to higher status institutions have received a higher quality education and are likely to have developed greater knowledge and skills. Similarly, it raises questions about whether Key Information Sets (KIS) will provide students, parents and employers with the information they need to judge the quality of undergraduate programmes, because they provide no information about the students' engagement with academic knowledge on their degree programmes.

Supporting evidence from the literature

Other studies have identified similar problems with higher education league tables (for example, see Pascarella 2001; Locke et al, 2008). However, these studies have not highlighted the importance of students' engagement with academic knowledge as a key indicator of the quality of undergraduate courses.

Implications

Neither the UK National Student Survey (NSS), the data from which is to be used in KIS, nor the US National Survey of Student Engagement, which some argue (for example Gibbs 2010) would be a more effective measures of educational quality, contain items that examine students' engagement with academic knowledge. Our findings, supported by other studies, suggest two possibilities for fairer indications of the quality of undergraduate experience that different institutions offer. First, that information should relate directly to students' experiences of studying at their institutions. So, for example, it would be fairer to have separate league tables for teaching and research. Second, as the NSS is likely to remain a primary source of data on the quality of undergraduate courses, items should be devised that look directly at students' engagement with academic knowledge on their courses. Such adjustments are important because otherwise students will be given a misleading impression of what is needed to benefit from higher education. Without engaging meaningfully in academic knowledge, students are unlikely to gain much benefit from studying an undergraduate degree.

Table 1: Universities' Rankings on Selected Scales (Institutions in bold have scores that are significantly higher than those in italics)

Scale (for Scale Items see Appendix II)	Ranking of universities
Processes	
Engagement with academic knowledge	Selective, Diversity , <i>Prestige, Community</i>
Good Teaching	Diversity, Community , <i>Selective, Prestige</i>
Outcomes	
1a. Enhanced academic skills	Selective, Diversity, Community, Prestige
1b. Enhanced employability skills	Diversity, Community , <i>Selective, Prestige</i>
2. Increased social confidence	Prestige, Community, Selective , <i>Diversity</i>
3. Changing self and society	Selective , Diversity, Prestige, <i>Community</i>

4. Conclusion

The knowledge, skills and dispositions that students learn at university should define the quality of the education that they have received. Our study is a strong endorsement of Gibb's (2010) conclusion that 'what best predicts educational gains is measurement of educational processes' (p.43). We can discern a potentially benevolent cycle. The key to a good quality university education is students' level of engagement with the knowledge of the discipline they are studying; the level of engagement depends on the level and direction of the students' effort, which is engendered by good teaching. This cycle means that students' engagement with academic knowledge and the teaching that supports such engagement need to be central to how the quality of undergraduate courses are defined, improved and measured.



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Appendix I: Project Outline

The Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project was a three-year ESRC-funded (Grant Number: RES-062-23-1438) longitudinal investigation of sociology and related social science degree courses in four universities, which were given the pseudonyms Prestige, Selective, Community, and Diversity Universities in order to reflect their different reputations. The departments at Prestige and Selective have been regularly rated in the top third of UK higher education league tables for their research and teaching in Sociology, whilst those at Community and Diversity have been regularly rated in the bottom third.

The project had the following objectives:
(1) To evaluate what sociology-related social science students value about their university education
(2) To investigate differences in curriculum and teaching in different universities
(3) To contribute to debates about what is good quality teaching in sociology-related social sciences.

Three years' intensive fieldwork produced rich data sets, including: in-depth interviews with 98 students eliciting biographical stories and their perceptions and experiences of higher education; 31 longitudinal case studies following students throughout the three years of their degree programmes; a survey of over 750 students; interviews with 16 staff; analysis of video recordings of teaching in each institution in each year of the degree (12 sessions); analysis of students' assessed work (examples from each year); a focus group discussion with tutors from all four institutions about students' assessed work; as well as documentary analysis and the collection of statistical data relating to the four departments.

Further information can be found at the project website: www.pedagogicequality.ac.uk

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Appendix II: Scale Items

Scale	Items
Processes	
Good Teaching (adapted from Ramsden 1992)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">My sociology tutors motivate me to do my best workMy sociology tutors put a lot of time into commenting (orally and/or in writing) on my workMy sociology tutors work hard to make their subjects interestingMy sociology tutors are extremely good at explaining thingsMy sociology tutors make a real effort to understand difficulties I may be having with my workMy sociology tutors normally give me helpful feedback on my progress
Engagement with academic knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">I benefit from being in contact with active Sociology researchersStudying sociology helps me to understand myselfI am becoming a sociologistStudying sociology helps me to understand other peopleSociology is very different from other disciplinesSociology is relevant to today's worldStudying sociology has changed my view of the worldThe point of studying sociology is to make the world a better placeThrough studying my degree I am beginning to see the world in sociological termsStudying sociology is about developing my opinions
Outcomes	
1a. Enhanced academic skills (items, but not scale, from Lawless and Richardson 2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ability to apply knowledgeCritical analysisSelf-disciplineIndependenceTime managementWriting skillsExpertise in sociology
1b. Enhanced employability skills (items, but not scale, from Lawless and Richardson 2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ability to analyse and use numerical dataAbility to work in teamsComputer literacyInterpersonal skillsLeadership skillsOral presentation skills
2. Increased social confidence (items, but not scale, from Brennan et al 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">I am a much more self-confident person than the person I was when I came hereI can't imagine losing touch with some of the friends I've made hereI would like to remain associated with the university in some wayI feel that I am now able to get on with a much wider range of peopleI don't really fit in here. I'll be quite glad to leaveThe qualification is the main thing. University has not changed me that much
3. Changing self and society (items, but not scale, from Brennan et al 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">My time at university has really changed the way I see the worldI now have a much clearer view of what I want to do in the futureI am very committed to sociology and would like somehow to continue to read/study them in the futureI want to use what I have learned in my degree to change the world for the betterStudying sociology has inspired me to become involved in political activity